RENAISSANCE OR HYPE?

Not ones for property brochures and lifestyle claptrap, Alex Griffiths and Johnny McLelland poked their noses in and had a word with CHPS architect Will Alsop.

In 2003, Urban Splash, Manchester City Council and English Partnerships took it upon themselves to breathe new life into a disadvantaged community with a strong heart and a brave soul. The people of the Cardroom Estate (the 'Cardroom', took its name from the old Ancouts cotton mills) share deep roots and a fragile existence – and a few of them have heard it all before. Although residents were sceptical of change, this project was heralded as addressing some desire to improve their lot and even make things better.

Redevelopment back in the seventies provided modern enough homes; however, the layout isolated the estate from its surroundings, leaving the area difficult to police. It quickly became a breeding ground for crime and many people moved away as soon as they could. Shops and pubs closed and the final blow was the closure of the primary school due to lack of numbers. A radical solution was needed.

Following consultation with the remaining residents, it was agreed that a bid should be made to Government for the area to become the UK’s third Millennium Community. Task number one: ditch the Cardroom name and with it all its negative associations. A return to the name by which it was known back in the 1840s was accepted and hey presto, New Islington was reborn. Founded in 1993 by Tom Bloxham and Jonathan Falkingham, Urban Splash, grew to earn a reputation as the country’s leading regeneration company – and one committed to the delivery of challenging and exciting regeneration projects.

The Millennium Communities Programme was launched in 1997 to provide a new model for sustainable and environmentally responsible communities across the UK. The programme is being implemented by English Partnerships, the national regeneration agency and is breaking new ground in achieving sustainable development and promoting best practice in residential development. Key themes are environmentally sustainable developments, maximising the quality of life for residents and ensuring the highest quality design standards.

Stroll around today and you will see bold, well-designed and modern homes offering stunning views either over the canal, the podium garden, or the city of Manchester itself. The designers decided that a quality landscape proposal was essential, as it helps create a real resource for the residents and will have a material effect on quality of life. The site will stand out through the density of planting; willows, pines and poplars, a forest garden, even an orchard. Planting will be encouraged on allotments, balconies, window baskets, hanging baskets and even rooftops. A new canal forms the dominant visual framework for the landscape; the large basin creates a real sense of open space at the heart of the scheme and sculptural islands rise from the water to create a series of new spaces and a habitat for wildlife.

Sustainability in New Islington is paramount. The dry, recyclable element of separated waste is to be treated on-site, with only a small element to be sent to municipal tips. Storm water can be handled locally to ensure the mains drainage system doesn’t bear the burden when it rains. Electricity is provided by a series of on-site, gas powered Combined Heat and Power (CHP) plants. Typically, ‘mains’ generated electricity is only 35% efficient, with 65% being wasted... most of it going into warming rivers. Local CHPs can be up to 85% efficient. Heating is a by-product of the generation of electricity and is used to warm the homes and provide hot water.

The site is nestled between the Rochdale Canal, which was filled with concrete in the seventies, when
people believed it had no future, and the Ashton Canal, which is part of the Cheshire Ring. It is also conveniently placed for the new extension for the Metrolink.

New Islington will boast a brand new school, St Anne’s Primary, which will cater for local children and will also incorporate an outdoor play area. Also in nearby Miles Platting, construction of a new £5.5m school has recently been completed. A £6.5m health centre has also opened - one of the largest primary care centres in Manchester. As well as housing two GP clinics, it will also provide family planning, mental health services and a pharmacy.

Sportcity is but a stone’s throw from New Islington. Originally developed for the 2002 Commonwealth Games it is now the 48,000-seat home of Manchester City. The site also houses the National Squash Centre, the 6,500-seat Manchester Regional Arena, the English Institute of Sport and the Manchester Velodrome.

The Eco Park, ‘Cotton Fields’, hosts the annual New Islington Festival for the musically inclined, billed as a celebration of residents, old and new. Held on the first Saturday of September, the free festival attracts visitors from east Manchester and across the city.

While researching “The Condition Of The Working Class In England”, Friedrich Engels observed that the area “contains a vast number of ruinous houses” and “the neglect of all repairs, the frequent periods of emptiness, the constant change of inhabitants, and the destruction carried on by the dwellers”. We’ll be talking to original residents in due course and regeneration projects will always be easy to criticise, but maybe, just maybe, East Manchester can really start shaking off its less than cherished past at last.

Ey up, Will, does Manchester hold particularly happy memories for a Northampton lad?

“Well I had been before this project but I found the more you go, the more you like it.

“So much of the history doesn’t show in the street but you can feel it. I’ve no specific musical memory from last time but I seem to remember always drinking too much until too late.”

Did you leave with a favourite mill... or recall any that could have done without any regenerating after all?

“Yes, the one opposite CHPS is pretty dull. It gives nothing to the canal edge there, however nice it may be on the inside. The worst parts of the city are those that kind of bleed off, like premature urban sprawl. I hate places that don’t belong either to a city or to the countryside.”

With coal and oil reserves low, and the pressure on to reduce carbon emissions, are you surprised the Government isn’t more eager to push combined heat and power?

“I’ve low expectations when it comes to governments, so nothing surprises me there. [Then Deputy PM] Prescott annoyed me when he talked of the need for more housing and then he goes and talks to mass home builders on green field sites... the challenge should be to evolve without spreading.”

Your industry has hardly been immune to the downturn… and Urban Splash has been squeezed recently, too. How does it look with your Alsop Architects hat on?

“It’s true there is pessimism everywhere but I’m quite cheerful. You can’t just say that people are glum, therefore we must build cheap shit houses! No one can say we knocked an estate down as part of any planning or social theory – the good news is I have no theory. So I feel free!”

Manchester is battling to attract residents back from the suburbs – especially families. Does the wider New Islington project address this and, if so, how exactly?

“We try and incorporate green all the time but these places should be intimate and not overdesigned. We wanted to capture people’s imagination and get more people to live and work in the centre.

“Identity is a key issue and the more people with civic pride the better... the strength of Manchester lies in the evolution that started in the nineties. At the risk of sounding arrogant we wanted to supply the icon it doesn’t have while providing somewhere in the centre of the city you’ll feel comfortable sat with a pint, a paper and a cig in your hand.”